

## Wang Guangyi's "Material Spirit": A Religion Embodied in Art

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### Art and Philosophy

"The profession of art still exists. Therefore, I am not a thinker, nor am I a philosopher; I am an artist with ideas" (see pp. 250–1). Considering Wang Guangyi's works and statements,<sup>1</sup> what emerges is a very important point in order to understand today's complex art world: the irreducibility of philosophy and art. In other words, contrary to what is posited by many artists and philosophers alike, art has a unique function within the sphere of human knowledge and practice. Creating art and being an artist is different from being a philosopher or a scientist. This is why Hegel's famous prophecy did not come true.<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to what is believed by some philosophers (exemplarily, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Arthur Danto), philosophy cannot take the place of art because, unlike art, it uses concepts and organizes them into arguments. Likewise, contrary to what is believed by many contemporary artists (exemplarily, Joseph Beuys and Joseph Kosuth),<sup>3</sup> art cannot hope to dismiss philosophy because, while making use of representations, it also requires that these be somehow incorporated in the work. I believe this issue is particularly relevant to the visual arts which, more than others, have undergone an identity crisis during the twentieth century: if it is true that Joseph Beuys would have been happy to be called a philosopher and certainly thought of himself as an educator, no musician or poet has ever seriously taken into consideration the Hegelian thesis of the death of art, at least not for what pertains to music or poetry.

Like it or not, visual art is a representation incorporated into a medium, and the latter is important for the work to be what it is. Even when visual arts make use of language, they do so in ways that are completely different from those

used in philosophy: in art, language reveals a highly metaphorical component that, for the most part, is foreign to philosophy. Moreover, the representation of art is not the same as that of philosophy. The latter is bound to a relationship of correspondence with the reality that it intends to capture through thought and, at least ideally, has to take responsibility for its truth. On the other hand, art concerns the dimension of fiction, of the fable, of myth or, also, as in the case of Wang Guangyi, the dimension of spirituality. It follows that art entertains a constitutively different relationship with the truth compared to philosophy.

From this perspective, it is not surprising that Wang Guangyi should not see the artistic practice as the development of the retinal perspective: art is not a form of knowledge like the others, such as humanistic knowledge and science. It is neither a form of knowledge of the sensible world, nor a special kind of naive physics that considers the reality available to perception. It is not even a simple reflection on its own means of expression—perspective, color theory, modes of representation, chiaroscuro, and so on. Rather it is a revisitation of the world, at least the part of it we can observe and understand, from the point of view of its most sensitive observers: artists. However—and this is the second salient aspect of Wang Guangyi's poetics—the artist, rather than paying attention to the visible or retinal properties of things, is particularly sensitive to the properties that the eye cannot see, but which are just as real and binding as traditional aesthetic or formal properties. It seems that the point is exactly this: to make the invisible visible, in an effort that does not require a faithful rendition of reality. What the artist really wants is for his work to reveal something that escapes from the *lògos*.

In the *Birth of Tragedy* (1872), discussing the origin of art, Friedrich Nietzsche proposed a very similar idea. He suggested answering the question about the essence of art ("What is art?") through the genealogical method, that is, by retrospectively determining the origin of the "thing" that we call art: in this way we will find that at the basis of art there is simply an instinct. This instinct, however, has not always been expressed in an artistic form. In fact, during the Hellenistic period, the human instinct for transcendence and sacredness found expression in music and theater. Music and theater, in the Nietzschean interpretation, are the ways in which human beings show their access to the sphere of sacredness. When the actor becomes aware of not being a body lent to the expression of the spirit but, more properly, of being part of a representation of the divine, then—and only then—there is a shift from the religious dimension to the artistic one.<sup>4</sup> In other words, there is a very subtle line separating art from religion. In essence, these are two different stages of our ability to represent the world: two different stages of representation, based on the same instinct.

I believe that Wang Guangyi would entirely agree with Nietzsche on this point: in their perspective, art and religion belong to the same dimension—they are one the evolution of the other. Religion and art belong to the sphere of myth and emotions, while philosophy belongs to that of *lògos*. And yet there is something that distinguishes art and religion: Nietzsche clearly identifies this something in representation. Artistic representation must be recognized as such by the spectator: this point is essential for the representation to be deemed artistic. In order for the spectator to understand the spectacle, he must be aware of the fact that what he sees is indeed a spectacle. In other words, he must know that he is dealing with something that concerns some aspects of reality, not with ordinary reality pure and simple.

Picasso pointed this out, in his own way, when he placed a real label on a (drawn) bottle of Suze. Already in the *Poetics*, Aristotle had underlined the importance of clearly grasping the difference between reality and fiction from the cognitive point of view, so that artistic fruition may be structured in the modalities that are proper to it. This point is very clear for what concerns the emotions we experience in the artistic relationship: "Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies."<sup>5</sup> For this relationship to exist and be effective, so as to allow for artistic enjoyment, the viewer must have some awareness of the object that is part of the relationship. Otherwise it would be as if a child riding a broom like a horse thought he was really riding a horse: it would not be a game, but a misunderstanding.

To sum up, one could therefore consider the topic as follows: art has traditionally had the task, among others, of representing reality. In the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche shows how to identify the characteristics and meaning of artistic representation. One of the earliest known forms of representation has to do with the sacred and consists in the idea that the tragic actor is the vehicle by which the divine concretely appears through a human body (the actor's). Therefore, in this framework, the divinity *re-presents* itself, in a space and in a time that are human. The evolution of the practice of tragic theater has allowed for the refinement of both the concept and the practices of representation: the god is not incorporated into a living body; rather, the actor's body refers to our concept of divinity. This is how representation, also in art, operates a shift between fidelity and fiction.

In this context, it is certainly possible for philosophy to invade the "territory" of art and vice versa but, on the whole, the domains of the two disciplines remain distinct. That said, it is also true that art and philosophy share at least one

thing: the fact that both represent their contents, albeit in ways that are typically different. This, in my opinion, is the element that Wang Guangyi manages to grasp so well, and this is why he is one of the key figures of contemporary art.

## New Contemporary Art

The interpretation Wang Guangyi offers of the contemporary world must therefore be brought back to this context, starting from the idea that the questions that arouse reflection on art generate new art (see Chapter 14, Yan Shanchun's conversation with Wang Guangyi). Ideas are not born out of nothing, rather they belong to a historical narrative that favors their development and determination. Therefore, every idea, even the most original, breaking with all that preceded it, can only derive from, and be understood based on, the general meaning of that narrative. In art, all things, even the most significant breaks, are necessarily part of the history of art. "Contemporary" art is therefore linked to the history of art and, at least in the case of Wang Guangyi, relates to it in terms of continuity rather than rupture. In many of his works, Wang Guangyi fully embraces the link with the past expressed by the history of art and, thanks to this choice, significantly enhances the representational scope of his works.

Let us consider some examples. Wang Guangyi implements this strategy in many works, but two cycles seem to me to be particularly significant in this regard. I am referring to *New Religion* and *Great Criticism*. *New Religion*, a series of oils on canvas, clearly intends to emphasize the pervasiveness of the religious sentiment that exists even where we would least suspect it. Religion, in this sense, is new, but only for what concerns its forms of manifestation, whereas the spirit that drives it is very ancient. The subjects are political leaders such as Mao, Lenin, or Stalin, spiritual leaders such as Christ and Pope John XXIII, and philosophers, in particular Marx and Engels. The fact that Wang Guangyi chose a particular rendering for the works of the cycle—the "negative" effect of photographic film—serves to guide the viewer towards a precise meaning common to all the paintings of *New Religion*. The negative effect has mainly the objective of eliminating the details of a face, of a body, of a context, while leaving the object of the representation perfectly recognizable. This is the same effect that we find in *Last Supper* (2011), a work openly inspired by Da Vinci and that, perhaps to make the citationist game even more acrobatic, could have been titled "This is not *Last Supper*"—alluding to Warhol rather than to Leonardo's original (Figure 3.1 see p. 45). Indeed, the reference to Warhol's interpretation



**Figure 3.1** Wang Guangyi, *New Religion—The Last Supper* (2011), oil on canvas, 400 × 1600 cm.

of *Last Supper* (1986) is certainly evident; in a sense, Wang Guangyi radicalizes Warhol's vision, making it even more powerful. Warhol doubles his last supper, exactly as if we put two snapshots, taken sequentially, next to each other, and uses color (black and yellow) in an extremely expressive way. The game of the double painted scene, in addition to recalling the idea of two successive frames, insists on obvious metaphysical allusions. In a strongly secularized world, such as the one that forms Andy Warhol's cultural and artistic horizon, it makes no sense to speak of monotheism: there are many values and gods. And, above all, less clearly than in Wang Guangyi's *Last Supper* but expressing exactly the same kind of intuition, Warhol blurs the details of the work, leaving the observer to face the full symbolic weight of the event. In Western and Christian traditions, that is the supper par excellence: the artist does not need to resort to formalist strategies to recall that event and its meanings.

By engaging in an even more openly symbolic poetic, Wang Guangyi uses color—in this case only the color red—to draw the outlines of shapes, objects, and people. Not only does the work need no narrative details, it does not need a title either: such is the power of the outline of those figures that the artist would have achieved his goal anyway. In fact, the observer, at least the Western one, cannot fail to recognize and complete the artistic narration. Even more than Warhol, Guangyi seems to want his art to exhibit a character of an affectivity, so much so that the viewer's attention is entirely directed to the power of the symbolic, that is, to what is represented in the work—to its meanings.

*Great Criticism*, the cycle that made the Chinese artist world famous, is a powerful variation of the same stylistic character. The works of *Great Criticism* present a double symbolic choice: they use some of the most widespread and powerful symbols of the Western world (and here, again, the influence of Warhol's Pop Art is evident), and link them to the images used by Chinese political propaganda (Figure 3.2 see p. 46). We see are peasants, soldiers, workers,





**Figure 3.2** Wang Guangyi, *Great Criticism—Marlboro* (1992), oil on canvas, 175 × 175 cm.

portrayed in standardized ways, therefore deeply rhetorical and stripped of any personal characteristic. Even more clearly than in *Last Supper*, characters take the place of people, and are presented as symbolic powers. In this way, Wang Guangyi achieves a contrast between two myths: the people—the embodiment of the Chinese spirit—and the individualism embodied in the symbols of the Western market: “In my view, the central point I want to express in the *Great Criticism* series is the ideological antagonism that exists between Western culture and socialist ideology. The significance of this antagonism has more to do with issues in cultural studies than simply art in and of itself.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet I think *Great Criticism* is more than the opposition of two worlds: it is the creation of a kind of meta-mythology, a synthesis of two worlds that, in Wang Guangyi’s vision and particular reinterpretation of Pop Art, come to a synthesis of

extraordinary symbolic power. Perhaps because of censorship, Wang Guangyi's work appears as a deconstruction—carried out according to the grammar of visual art—of the myth of consumerism fueled by North American culture. However, his stylistic choice to use Pop Art should not be underestimated, also in terms of the meaning embedded in the work. Wang Guangyi appropriates what is perhaps the best-known language of twentieth-century Western art to deconstruct the culture that produced it: in so doing, though, he places his own art in the wake of that culture, de facto recognizing its supremacy. In some ways it is also possible to go further and consider *Great Criticism* as the construction of a new mythology that has the same virtues—and therefore the same vices—as the Warholian mythology.

I will try to explain myself better. Let us go back to the parallelism between Wang Guangyi and Andy Warhol. The latter's works are certainly perfect examples of how art can engage, in a clever and deep way, with populist attitudes and inclinations. Warhol was universally known for having magnified American populism and for making it an interpretative lens through which to read the reality of his time. So, *Mao*, painted by Warhol in 1973 (see Figure 7.1), represents Mao Zedong in the same pop style with which Warhol had eternalized Marilyn Monroe, making her an icon. If there is no difference between an actress and a political leader like Mao—that is, if both are symbolic figures, authors of and actors in two different cultural mythologies—the artist can emphasize this aspect, representing them with the same style: Pop. Warhol could probably have named his portrait *Demythologizing Mao*. Indeed, Warhol was a deconstructor, but he was also the creator of that mythology, mythologizing mass culture and American society of the twentieth century. His extraordinary *Coca-Cola*, which is a symbol of the North American lifestyle, is simply perfect as it is and, perhaps for this reason, Warhol chose to represent it without any redundancy or stylistic refinement. It is as though he wanted to say, "This is Coca-Cola: this is America. Nothing else is needed: both are perfect the way they are."

Wang Guangyi's goal in *Great Criticism* was akin to Warhol's: he used Warhol's style to deconstruct what Warhol had mythologized and magnified. He demythologized the mythologist. Having said that, are we sure that *Great Criticism* is only a major act of cultural and artistic deconstruction, a criticism of Western culture and market? I don't think so, and Wang Guangyi himself often leaves clues in his works to lead us in the right interpretative direction, so as to understand the conceptual and semantic difference between him and Andy Warhol.

As the latter had done with American culture, Wang Guangyi is mythologizing Chinese culture, using a narrative model that is itself a little populist. In other words, Wang Guangyi's art is to Chinese culture what Warhol's is to Western culture, but there is difference. If Warhol recognizes the world that he mythologizes as the best of all possible worlds—exemplifying a perfect ideal of democracy, where both the President of the United States and the average American citizen can drink the same Coca-Cola—Wang Guangyi, using the telling elements disseminated in his works (letters, numbers, grids: see, e.g., *Hand-waving Mao Zedong with Black Square*, or *Great Criticism—Coca-Cola*), warns us that his mythology refers to a higher universe. It is the “true” universe, the space of the sacred that Wang Guangyi sees as the core of reality—the origin and the ultimate *télos* of the world that he is mythologizing and, at the same time, describing so well.

With any great deconstruction project, it makes sense to ask to what end it has been undertaken, because no deconstruction makes sense or is more than sophistry, albeit very elegant and sophisticated, if it does not aim at a reconstruction. It seems to me that Wang Guangyi's reconstruction is essentially about the transcendental dimension, and that his deconstruction is almost a pretext to constantly remind us of the sacred—which is very clear if you consider the origin of the art, described at the beginning of this chapter.

If the original dimension of art is that of the sacred, which the developments of representation have been able to diminish through all possible media, it is clear that transcendence is what the artist looks for and seeks. But how can one—as Kant noted so acutely—express narratively and symbolically something that cannot be understood through the tools of reason, or that escapes any attempt at incorporation? Kant reminded us that the thing, in itself, marks the horizon that defines the very possibility of human existence and action. Beyond that limit we can intuit the presence of a boundless domain that is fundamental for our lives, but to embody that domain—to express its meanings in a concrete body—is something that lies on the edge of what can or cannot be done. This is why Wang Guangyi often resorts to graphic and symbolic tools that interrupt and occlude the presence of a perceptual datum or refer to a presence that is given only through absence, as in the case of the shroud. Wang Guangyi's shroud bears no sign of the body—perhaps there is a trace of it in the folds of the fabric, but the artist seems to tell us that there is no point in looking for it: all we would see is the trace of the human dimension, something that brings us back to what a body once was.



The space of the human and that of transcendence are circumscribed by strong boundaries: they are like solid thick walls, built with jute bags (see *Things-in-Themselves*, Figure 8.2 see p. 162). It is unthinkable to be able to circumvent those walls, but perhaps if we try we will be able to catch a glimmer of light that shines through the rough canvas. After all, Wang Guangyi is giving us the same suggestion that Plato had already offered us: if we cannot enjoy the real world by observing it in full light, at least we must try to recompose the fragments we can find in its shadows.

## Notes

- 1 Paparoni, 2013.
- 2 Hegel, 1807.
- 3 Goldie and Schellekens, 2007.
- 4 Nietzsche, 1872.
- 5 Aristotle, 1978: 48b, 9–12.
- 6 AA.VV., 2002: 28.

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